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ABSTRACT

Because more Western Australian students are now completing years 11 and 12 and because many of these students are not interested in the traditional college entrance program, a growing number of schools are offering alternative programs. These programs are extremely diverse across the state and may be either prevocational or general, may contain standard or locally developed courses, and may be distinct from or integrated with the regular program. While the State Board of Secondary Education has developed alternative courses in areas like animal husbandry and general English, state policy is to encourage schools to offer locally developed courses. The State Education Department offers resources to help schools developing alternatives. Bentley Senior High School outside Perth has encountered many issues involved in implementing alternative courses. Here, after the need was first recognized by teachers, the principal formed an advisory committee. After holding a seminar and a general staff meeting on alternatives, the committee drew up courses for the following year. Students now choose from three programs: traditional academic courses, courses developed by the Board of Secondary Education, and courses developed by the school. Although more resources and staff appear to be needed, initial results have been encouraging. (Author/JM)

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EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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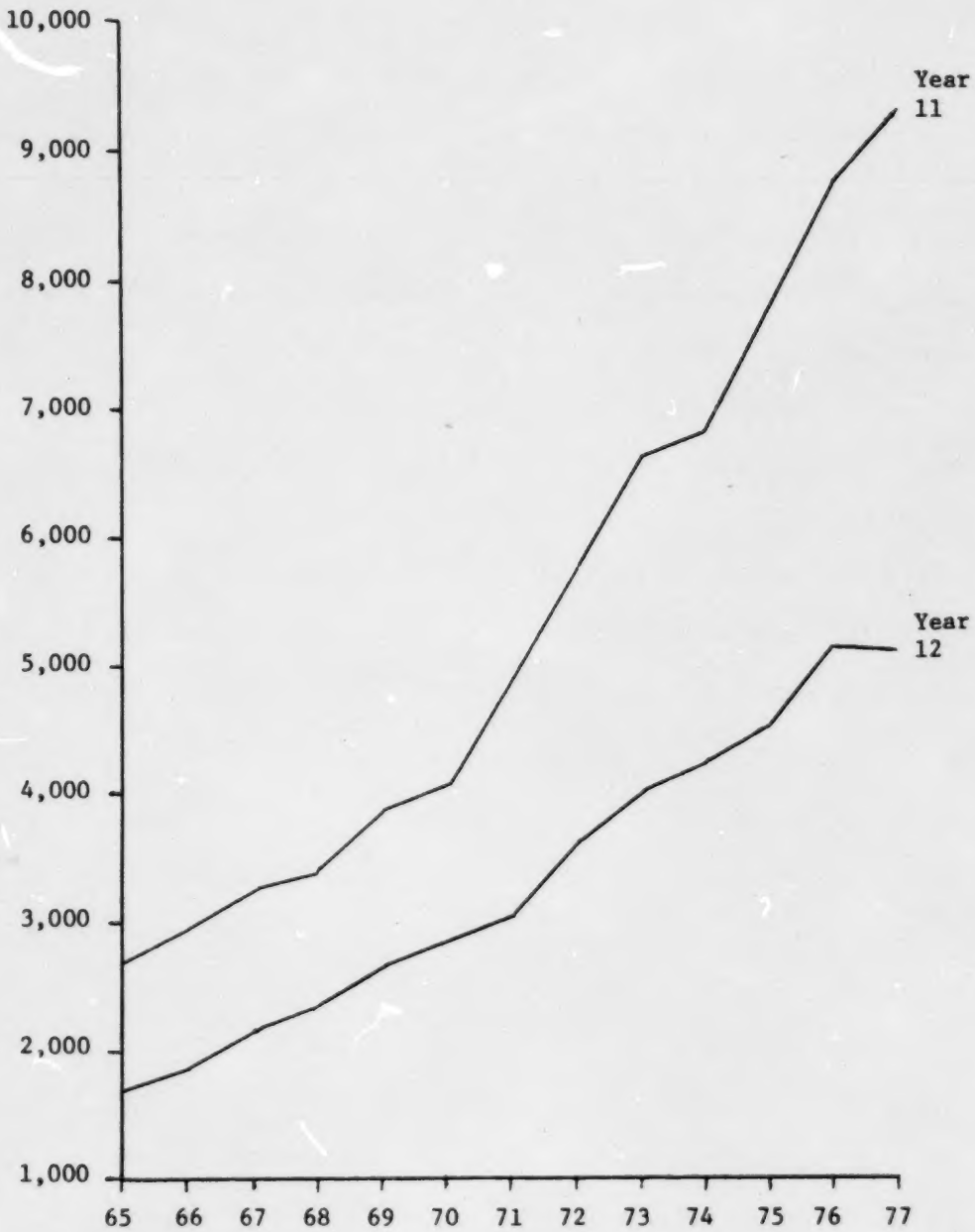
1977

Over the past decade there has been a remarkable growth in the proportion of students continuing into Years 11 and 12 in Western Australian high schools (figure 1). In particular, a marked trend towards increasing numbers of students entering Year 11 has become evident during the 1970's. Retention rates in Government schools for students staying on to Year 11 (as percentages of the previous year) have soared from 30.0 per cent in 1966 to 52.8 per cent in 1976.

Reasons for this growth are not hard to find. One factor has undoubtedly been the rising expectations of parents, employers and other sections of the community regarding levels of educational attainment of school leavers. The value of getting as much education as possible is still unquestioned by the majority of people. Other factors include improved economic conditions and increased availability of secondary school facilities and programmes. More recently, rising unemployment resulting from increasing competition for a decreasing number of jobs has boosted the numbers staying on at school beyond Year 10.

For the schools, the problem of coping with mushrooming upper school populations has been much more than simply a numbers game. The new upper schools are not only bigger; they contain a wider range of interest patterns, vocational aspirations and abilities than in the past. Traditionally it was expected that students entering the senior school would follow an academic course leading to the Leaving Examinations of the now-defunct Public Examinations Board. A few left before the completion of the two-year course to take up jobs as bank clerks, nurses and the like. The majority,

FIGURE I: NUMBERS ENROLLED IN YEARS 11 AND 12 IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1965-1977



however, were expected to sit for the final examinations in order to qualify for admittance to one of the tertiary institutions. Catering for this academically inclined and able group of student was, and still is, one of the chief functions of senior schools. Currently, the needs of this group are being met through a wide range of courses leading to the Tertiary Admissions Examinations (T.A.E.) which are approved and certificated by the Board of Secondary Education (B.S.E.).

However, there are now significant numbers of students entering Year 11 who have either little enthusiasm or little aptitude for the mainstream academic courses offered by the schools. Their motives for continuing on into the senior high school are many and varied and it is difficult and perhaps unrealistic to categorise the diversity of educational needs and demands encountered. Included in the heterogeneous group are certain less able students who in some cases feel emotionally and socially unready to leave school and who seek a less academically demanding general course. Others are looking for some type of programme which would enhance their prospects of securing apprenticeships, entry into technical schools, or employment. In detail, the pattern of needs often varies considerably according to local circumstances.

The major initiatives in catering for these students have been assumed by the schools themselves. With Departmental encouragement and approval, individual schools have developed or modified courses as local needs have become pressing. Currently, alternative courses have been made available in 40 per cent of Government senior high schools in Western Australia. Perhaps the most notable feature of these courses is the considerable diversity in the approaches being

employed by different schools. In addition to catering for somewhat dissimilar groups, the programmes in operation often show marked differences in content, organisation and declared purposes.

Some schools have set up programmes with a definite practical or technological emphasis, and which are designed to cater in a more or less general way for students who might be planning a delayed entry into one of the trade apprenticeships. These programmes typically aim at extending or upgrading the students' existing qualifications (particularly in mathematics or science) and tend to emphasise workshop practice and outside work experience.

Other schools operate courses aimed at extending the students' general education rather than providing any particular prevocational background as such. Some of these programmes consist almost entirely of locally selected content, while others have offered composite programmes allowing variable selections of school-developed courses and externally examined T.A.E. subjects.

While a number of schools have arranged their students in special independently timetabled classes, others have allowed for some overlap with other courses, including Year 10 courses, or have timetabled the alternative courses students within the normal Year 11 structures. In most cases, the students' programmes have been spread over several teachers, although where continuous pastoral care is considered to be of critical importance, the number of teachers involved has been restricted, sometimes to a single staff member for a major part of the week.

At the Departmental level, the issue of alternative courses in the senior high school came to prominence following a Principals' Conference held in April 1975. As a result of this Conference, a Principals'

Advisory Committee on Year 11/12 Terminal Course Needs was convened by Mr H.W. Louden (then Director of Secondary Education, now Assistant Director-General (Schools and Services)). This Committee reported back to a subsequent Principals' Conference in November, 1975, making the point that a systems-level approach to alternative courses did not seem to be possible. In March, 1976, a smaller committee was formed with the functions of overviewing developments, facilitating the exchange of information between various subject-area working parties, and advising on appropriate system-level involvement where needed. This committee has been active in monitoring developments in the schools and in sponsoring a number of seminars and in-service courses on alternative courses in the upper school.

In formulating Departmental policy on alternative courses, the major issue has been the question of responsibility for curriculum development and course assessment. Should this responsibility be vested in an external body, such as the Board of Secondary Education (B.S.E.); should it be assumed by the Education Department; should it be devolved in the schools themselves; or should all three share this responsibility?

In 1976, the B.S.E. entered the field of alternative courses by offering a number of two-year upper-school courses not examined by the Tertiary Admissions Examinations (T.A.E.), but fully assessed within the school, though with a co-ordinated test as a means of moderating school assessments. These subjects ranged from Animal Husbandry, Commercial Law and Current Events to General English, Media Studies and Motors and Machines. Levels achieved in these

approved B.S.E. courses will be reported on the Certificate of Secondary Education issued to students along with levels achieved in courses examined by the T.A.E. An important advantage of these courses is that they provide the student with a recognised certificate from a respected external authority. Their chief disadvantage is that they fail to cater for the full range of student needs in terms of course content and duration.

There is a precedent for the Education Department to attempt to cater for some of the needs not catered for by external certification. The Department presently operates and certificates a one-year Business Studies course intended chiefly for girls who are hoping to find jobs as clerks and typists. However, it is to be noted that the Business Studies course is an attempt to meet consistent and substantial demands for a specific set of vocational skills. It is thus amenable to a systems-level approach, unlike other alternative course subjects proposed by schools which are invariably related to local needs, local interests and local resources and which defy a systems approach.

School-based curriculum development also has both pros and cons. On the one hand it allows for local needs to be catered for and avoids the rigid uniformity which centralised bodies such as the B.S.E. or the Education Department might impose on the curriculum. On the other hand, there are the problems of finding both the time and the resources needed to develop new courses and of securing recognition by groups outside the school for any certificate issued by the school. However, these problems can be overcome. For example, Kewdale Senior High School has for many years certificated its own electro-technology course,which has been readily accepted by employers.

In view of the above considerations, the policy which has emerged has been to favour a sharing of responsibilities for the development and certification of alternative courses, though with an emphasis upon school-based initiatives. In general, encouragement is given to schools who wish to experiment with alternative courses in Years 11 and 12 and who wish to offer locally developed courses with some form of school-issued report or certificate at the end. This applies especially for those courses which are not intended to extend beyond Year 11. In cases where an alternative course is conceived as a two-year course, schools are urged to consider the possibility of submitting school courses to the B.S.E. for award under the Certificate of Secondary Education. While schools which become involved in alternative courses are unlikely to get any special concessions they are eligible for the normal accommodation and staffing allocations. Assistance is also available through the Department's central curriculum services for the preparation of guidelines and the bringing together of resources (both materials and personnel) which could assist schools in developing or assembling their own courses. Future policy decisions will probably be closely related to the evolution of B.S.E. courses not examined by the T.A.E.

Given a policy which emphasises school-based initiatives in establishing alternative courses for senior school students, the Education Department's Alternative Courses Steering Committee has been keenly interested in the process whereby individual schools become involved in establishing alternative courses, the way in which they go about developing such courses, and the kinds of problems they typically encounter. The second part of this article therefore consists of an

1. *Guidance Officer Sue Green discusses selection of Year 11 courses for 1978 with two Year 10 students.*

2. *The Bentley Senior High School Alternative Courses Committee in session.*

account of and commentary upon the development of alternative courses at Bentley Senior High School, Western Australia. In selecting Bentley, the intention has not been to project this school as a model for other schools to follow, nor to represent Bentley as being typical of the way in which schools generally have responded to the challenge of alternative courses. Ratner, the intention has been to use the Bentley experience to identify and explore issues associated with the implementation of a policy of essentially school-initiated development of alternative courses.

Bentley Senior High School is located in the southern suburbs of the Perth Metropolitan area, adjoining the campus of the Western Australian Institute of Technology. The school has a total enrolment of approximately 900 students, including 144 Year 11 students and 67 Year 12 students. Forty-three of the Year 11 students are presently following a terminal one-year Business Studies course. Two characteristics of the student population are worthy of note. The first is that Bentley has a declining student population. The second is that a large proportion of the students come from relatively low socio-economic backgrounds.

The sequence of events leading to alternative courses being offered at Bentley Senior High School may be described as follows. In December, 1976, Keith Taylor, an upper-school teacher, attended an In-Service Seminar on Alternative Courses sponsored by the Education Department. This participation seems to have triggered off subsequent events. Soon a number of teachers, aware that the school was failing to cater properly for the needs of a growing number of students entering Year 11, began seriously discussing the possibility of introducing alternative courses at Bentley Senior High School. The appointment of a new principal in 1977 provided an opportunity for a group of teachers to raise the

question of alternative courses. Through various Principals' Conferences and discussions with Superintendents and colleagues, the new Principal, Mr Jack Eborall, was aware of and sympathetic towards developments in this area and, mid-way through first term, he invited interested staff members to form with him an advisory committee on alternative courses.

This committee, with Mr Eborall as its chairman, included the deputy principal, the principal mistress, four subject heads, two classroom teachers and the youth education officer. In order to gather general information on and insight into alternative courses, members of the committee visited four senior high schools in the metropolitan area in which such courses were already in operation. In addition, course outlines from two other schools were obtained and examined. The committee held a number of pre-school meetings and from time to time briefed the staff on its deliberations. Teachers on the committee informally discussed the topic with their students, while parents were kept informed by circular of the possibility of providing alternative courses in 1978.

Towards the end of June 1977, a seminar was organised at Bentley Senior High School to explore the issues involved in planning alternative courses. Present at this seminar were staff from Bentley Senior High School, staff from other schools planning courses in 1978, and members of the Education Department. Some of the key questions discussed at this meeting were:

- How can we avoid the Alternative Courses being seen as a repository for inferior students?
- Should we encourage students to leave the course freely if an employment opportunity arises?

- Can we be flexible enough to re-admit students after an unsatisfactory employment experience or after an unsuccessful effort on T.A.E. Courses?
- Should we try to concentrate on building personal qualities by a general programme or should we concentrate on pre-vocational skills?
- If we decide to blend the offerings for general and pre-vocational education, would it be best to counsel students to make appropriate subject choices or should courses be firmly structured?
- If we have a range of alternative subjects, how directive should we be in assigning students to them?
- Should we try to discourage the bright student with very low aspirations from choosing subjects on the basis of ease?

Within a week of the seminar being held, the Bentley committee met and reached a decision to offer a range of alternative subjects in 1978.

During July the tempo of activities increased dramatically as the committee moved into the detailed planning phase. Following a general staff meeting at the school at which the committee's proposals were outlined and discussed, work was begun on drawing up courses to be offered for students entering Year 11 the following year. As a result, students entering Year 11 at Bentley in 1978 will be able to choose their own programme from three groups of subjects:

Group 1. This group consists of Tertiary Admissions Examination (T.A.E.) subjects studied for two years and leading up to a final external examination. The T.A.E. results are used by the tertiary institutions to select prospective students. In addition, they are combined with

school assessments by the Board of Secondary Education (B.S.E.) as a leaving qualification at the end of secondary education. Traditionally, Bentley students have attempted six T.A.E. subjects at the outset of Year 11. Those students intending to progress to the University of Western Australia or Murdoch University will continue to select six T.A.E. subjects. However, students not seeking university admission, but intending to enrol in T.A.E. subjects, will be advised to commence five T.A.E. subjects, choosing the equivalent of a sixth from the subject Groups 2 and 3.

Group 2. This group consists of B.S.E. subjects developed by schools, studied for two years and internally assessed in the school, with Board moderation of school assessments. Results obtained in these subjects are recorded on the Certificate of Secondary Education issued by the Board, along with any T.A.E. subjects taken from Group 1.

Group 3. This group includes alternative subjects developed and assessed by the school and the Certificate of Business Studies course developed and certified by the Education Department. Progress in the former will be monitored by the school on a term by term basis.

The complete list of subjects being offered for 1978 is shown in Table 1.

As far as certification is concerned, it has been decided that all students completing Year 11 will receive a Bentley Senior High School Certificate recording achievement in all T.A.E., B.S.E. and Alternative Course subjects. Those students completing Year 12 will automatically receive a Certificate of Secondary Education showing grades received in T.A.E. and B.S.E. subjects.

TABLE 1: SUBJECTS BEING OFFERED TO YEAR 11 STUDENTS AT BENTLEY SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 1978

GROUP 1 (T.A.E.)	GROUP 2 (B.S.E.)	GROUP 3 ALTERNATIVE COURSE SUBJECTS
Accounting	Australian Society	Art
Applied Technology	Commercial Law	Business Studies - General
Art	Current Events	Business Studies - Stenography
Biology	Media Studies	Drama
Chemistry	Typewriting and Business Communication	English Literature
Economics		General Science
English		Home Economics
English Literature		The Australian Language
French		Leisure Skills
Geography		Mathematics
History		Metal Trades
Home Economics		Photography and Film Making
Human Biology		Pre-Vocational Trades
Mathematics I		Wood Trades
Mathematics II		
Mathematics III		
Mathematics IV		
Physical Science		
Physics		
Technical Drawing		

To help Year 10 students and their parents in choosing between the many options open to students at the end of Year 10, the school's Guidance Officer, Sue Green, prepared a 44-page booklet entitled Next Year, in which the various options are discussed and information is provided on seeking employment, enrolling in various Technical College and Business College courses, and continuing into Year 11 at Bentley Senior High School. Much of the booklet is devoted to an outline of each of the subjects being offered to Year 11 students at Bentley in 1978, as listed above.

Year 10 students took home copies of Next Year towards the end of July, 1977. During the following month, those intending to proceed to Year 11 were issued with a worksheet and asked to plan their course selection, having first studied the booklet and consulted the Guidance Officer and subject teachers regarding the appropriateness of the choices made. On the basis of these returns, work has begun on a timetable incorporating all those subjects which have attracted viable numbers of students, and including 10 out of the original 15 Group 3 Alternative Course subjects.

At this stage, much remains to be done and there are many unknowns to be faced. Nevertheless, it would seem worthwhile reporting the reactions of committee members to their involvement to date in getting Alternative Courses started at Bentley Senior High School.

Most importantly, enthusiasm for the initial idea has been maintained and morale is generally high. This is no doubt in part due to the positive response shown by students and parents, who have reinforced the conviction that the venture represents a worthwhile attempt to meet a genuine need. Several of the committee members commented that they had gained a lot from the exercise in terms of an increased awareness of and sensitivity to a whole range of educational issues. For at least one teacher, the experience of working as a member of a team which was directly involved in decision-making and action on an issue of some consequence, was important.

Among the factors which have enabled Bentley to make the progress it has made in organising alternative courses for 1978, teachers emphasised the sympathetic attitude of the Principal and the energies

of various committee members. A further factor has been good communication between the committee and the school at large. Students, staff and parents have all been consulted and informed at regular intervals.

However, it has not all been plain sailing. Almost all of those involved mentioned the problems of finding the time needed to properly design and organise alternative courses. Arranging times when all members of the planning committee could meet was especially difficult and was usually resolved by holding meetings before or after school. At one stage relief teachers were provided by the Education Department to secure a half-day release for committee members to hold an important meeting. Currently, timetabling and administration of the alternative courses programme is proving very time-consuming and is likely to continue to do so throughout this and the coming year. At present, much of this work falls to the deputy principal. Teachers at Bentley feel that the task is of sufficient magnitude as to require a member of staff to be given a certain amount of time release from teaching duties to be responsible for much of the on-going administration of the alternative courses programme at the school.

A further problem concerns the securing of resources needed to establish alternative courses. There are inevitably demands for equipment and materials in getting new subjects started, especially in the case of subjects such as Media Studies and the various Trades courses being offered. In addition, it would seem that alternative courses generate rather special staffing requirements. In particular, because the number of students opting for new subjects is often lower than for established subjects, there would seem to be a case for a

rather more generous staffing ratio to get the new subjects started. The Principal at Bentley, Mr Jack Eborall, is increasingly concerned that a number of the more innovative subjects being offered are unlikely to get off the ground without an initial boost in terms of more generous staffing provision.

Of course, the real test is yet to come and the committee are fairly open-minded at this stage as to the likely outcomes of introducing the alternative courses programme in 1978. There is a general feeling that there is still much to be learnt through actual experience in operating the programme and that it will be important to maintain flexibility and responsiveness to the situation and to the changing needs of the students. At the same time, there is also a certain quiet satisfaction with the progress made to date in meeting the challenge of changing patterns of interests, vocational aspirations and abilities of students entering Year 11 at Bentley Senior High School.

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